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UX Research & Design

Snapshots of experience: photo diaries and elicitation

AS the old saying goes "a picture paints a thousand words". This proverb essentially means that images and drawings are often superior storytelling tools to written and verbal communications. However, when it comes to user research it seems to me that too little attention is paid to this fact.

Over the past four years, as I have researched how users experience library services around the world, visual methods – specifically, the taking of photographs and drawing of sketches (see my 'cognitive maps' column) have proved to be an integral part of my research armoury and I cannot imagine being, or choosing to do, without them. Here I would like to focus on two methods involving photographs: both the act of taking them and responding to those already taken.

Warts and all

Photo elicitation is the unnecessarily pretentious name for the act of showing photographs to your users with a view to receiving, or indeed eliciting, a response. The technique inherently accepts that people respond to images in ways that can be surprisingly illuminating. They can trigger emotional reactions, cause the subject to remember specific experiences in detail, or influence them to discuss topics or subjects that they consider to be of related interest. As with cognitive maps this method draws user attention to a prop, in this case an image, helping them to feel less confronted than they might be by a face-to-face interview. Ideally the images should be saved in advance and shown to the interviewee on a tablet or smartphone one by one. It is important that the images chosen are truly representative of your library spaces, rather than the best views and vistas. Instead you need to show them

the library 'warts and all', including all those things that usually receive criticism such as toilets, self-service machines and stairwells. For regular user research interviews, I advise library staff not to take too many notes and to instead record proceedings in order to ensure due attention is offered to your subject, however, for photo elicitation, you can afford to take more notes as participants will be looking at the images rather than you while responding. As well as noting user responses to the different spaces and services that your subject mentions, consider what they choose not to mention including the spaces that they are not familiar with and don't use, this can be equally telling.

Photo diary

A popular alternative to the above approach is to ask users to keep a photo diary for an extended period of time which records their library and information behaviour, typically as part of a cultural probe (see my 'cultural probes' column, *Information Professional* June 2019 pp. 48-49). It is my experience that unless you specify otherwise, some participants will search Google for images rather than personally take them. While this will still give you information on user preferences, typically with this method you are seeking to collect original photographs.

A more basic version of this photo diary approach is to ask a user to gather five to eight photographs in 10 minutes with each photograph corresponding to a subject, such as: 'my favourite space'; 'the best/worst thing in the library'; 'something surprising'; and 'somewhere you never go'. It is advisable to accompany the user for this task to ensure they complete the task. Once they are done they can briefly take you through the photographs they took using the same elicitation method detailed further

above. As is often the case with UX research you are using methods which, as well as truly engaging and inspiring the user, also draw them into a beneficial interview scenario which adopts the materials they have produced as the creative focus. While the photographs users take can sometimes be interesting, it is more often the case that it is the unique dialogue with the library user that this method naturally engenders that is far more valuable. **IP**

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